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ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic methods of field work and data analysis, this study investigated one example of a comprehensive senior high school to illuminate the nature of its organizational structure and the way in which organizational control and leadership is exercised. Three principal findings emerged from theme analysis of the data. First, organizational culture is salient in understanding the organizational characteristics of the school. Values shared by professional personnel in the school and reinforced by legends, heroes, stories, rituals, and ceremonies were powerful in the exercise of control and organizational discipline. Second, the school was multicultural, in that subunits of the school possess distinctive values of their own, even while they share in the overall culture of the school. Third, the high school is aptly described by the metaphor of the clan, which suggests concepts about the exercise of control and leadership that differ from either the classic concepts of bureaucracy or more recent metaphors such as loose coupling. The clan of the particular school reported in this study is described as being impoverished, professional, and embattled. The study concludes that organizational culture may be important in understanding the causative interactions between organization and leadership on the one hand and organizational climate on the other. (Author/TE)

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American High School as a Clan:
Dynamics of Organization and Leadership

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American High School as a Clan:
Dynamics of Organization and Leadership

Abstract

Utilizing ethnographic methods of field work and data analysis, this study sought to illuminate two questions concerning one example of that type of public school in America known as the comprehensive senior high school:

1. What is the nature of the organizational structure of the comprehensive senior high school?

2. How is organizational control and leadership exercised in such a school?

Three principal findings emerged from theme analysis of the data:

1. Organizational culture is salient in understanding the organizational characteristics of the school. Values shared by professional personnel in the school, and reinforced by legends, heroes, stories, rituals, and ceremonies were powerful in the exercise of control and organizational discipline.

2. The school was multicultural. While sub-units of the school share the overall culture of the school, they also possess distinctive values of their own.

3. The high school is aptly described by the metaphor of the

clan, and this suggests concepts about the exercise of control and leadership in the school that differ from either the classic concepts of bureaucracy or more recent metaphors, such as loose coupling.

The clan of the particular school reported in this study is described as being impoverished, professional, and embattled.

The author reports finding Tagiuri's theoretical work on organizational climate useful in analyzing the data and concludes that organizational culture of the school may be profoundly important in understanding the causative interactions between the dynamics of organization and leadership on the one hand and the development of organizational climate on the other hand. In view of the centrality of organizational climate in the research literature on instructionally effective schools, this may be a potentially important conclusion from this study.

American High School as a Clan:
Dynamics of Organization and Leadership

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to describe and explain critical organizational characteristics of one example of that type of public school in America known as the comprehensive senior high school. That is, a four-year school comprising grades 9-12 offering a so-called comprehensive curriculum. The study sought to answer two questions in particular: (1) What is the nature of the organizational structure of the comprehensive senior high school? (2) How is organizational control and leadership exercised in such a school?

Background.

While the casual observer might assume that the organizational characteristics of public schools are well-known, a growing body of research literature, now roughly a decade old, has cast doubt on that assumption. A salient controversy in the literature is whether schools are best described in terms of classical bureaucratic structural concepts (Weber, 1947; Weick, 1982; Meyer and Rowan, 1983) or some of the symbolic concepts proffered by such metaphors from the "new perspectives" as loosely coupled systems and organized anarchies (Clark, D.L., et al, 1981). Further, attention has been drawn to the possibility that elemen-

tary schools and secondary schools are such distinctively different kinds of organizations that analyses treating "schools" as a unique general class of organization may be misleading (Firestone and Herriott, 1982).

Arguably, the organizational context of a high school affects the schooling process inasmuch as it influences the specific, day-to-day, hour-by-hour experiences of teachers and students. This study sought to explore and illuminate the connections between organizational variables and the behavior of the adults who inhabit the comprehensive senior high school as a workplace. Recognizing the dynamic nature of human social systems, it also explored and illuminated the impact of organizational characteristics on the work behavior of the high school principal.

Method

The method used in this investigation was ethnographic: the investigator went into the school and "lived with" the principal on a full-time basis from mid-August (two weeks prior to the opening of the school year) until school closed for the winter recess in late December. During this data-collection period observations and interviews were recorded and non-commissioned documents examined.

During the second half of the school year emphasis shifted from data collection to theme analysis of the data. During this

period of time the investigator went to the school less frequently (averaging one day per week) primarily to conduct cross-checks, member-checks, and otherwise triangulate the themes that were emerging from data analysis (Denzin, 1978).

Principles and techniques used to assure methodological adequacy in this research have been described elsewhere (Owens, 1982).

Data Source.

To select the high school to be the site of this inquiry, first, a group of high schools included in the service area of a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) district of New York State was identified. Then, an expert panel of professional school administrators was polled to rank the schools in the group in terms of the reputed effectiveness of the principal. With the field narrowed, preliminary interviews of the principals of the nominated schools were conducted. Final selection of the school to be the site of the study was based in large part on the principal's ability to articulate the nature of his or her work and on his or her interest in participating in such a long-term and demanding study, together with the investigator's impression of the likelihood that necessary rapport could be maintained between investigator and the principal throughout such a protracted period of field study (Wolcott, 1973).

While one cannot draw firm conclusions about the effectiveness of the particular high school that became the site of this

study or the principal of that school, the procedure used did serve to screen out schools and principals that (in the judgment of the panel of practitioners) were patently on the lower end of the effectiveness scale.

Findings

Three principal findings emerged from the analysis of data:

1. The salience of organizational culture in understanding the organizational characteristics of the school. The predominant organizational fact about the high school is the overwhelming role and function of the culture (Mead, 19XX, p.vii) in defining organizational structure and exercising organizational control and discipline. The principal of the school, and indeed everyone else, continually used the language of bureaucracy to express the logic and rationality of what they were doing. There was a great deal of talk about rules, hierarchical power, chain of command, and the other conventional attributes of bureaucracy. But the power of organizational history, legends, myths, heroes, stories, rituals and ceremonies, specialized language, and other cultural symbols to establish and reinforce shared understandings, values, and norms was striking in this school. However, in talking with the teachers, administrators and other adults who work in this school, it is clear that they recognize and accept the legitimacy of of bureaucratic ideas in our society. Indeed, they seemed to have no other model by which to make sense of their organizatio-

nal experience.

Thus, they use the language of bureaucracy to conceptualize and describe their situation. But, in fact, the system that unites the adults in the school is not the job descriptions, the rules, the surveillance by administrators. It is the traditions of schooling in general; the well-established strong cultural patterns that characterize the professional field of practice known as education; and powerful social norms arising from the history and traditions of this particular school. These provide the "glue" that is essential for the disparate individuals and groups in the organization to act with reasonable cohesiveness and unity. These cultural themes are often reiterated and reinforced through the retelling of stories and legends, the extolling of heroes, and the reinforcement of highly-valued norms.

The culture of this school organization not only provides an extremely strong, highly elastic and resilient glue that assures great cohesiveness in the high school but the culture also establishes the standards of work behavior. The result is that, while hierarchical surveillance of much of the teacher's work is indeed minimal, the teacher is under constant powerful constraints and continually receiving strong cues from collegial referents as to what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in role on the job.

The implications for leadership by the principal are very clear. Though he used the jargon usually associated with such

time-honored two-dimensional or three-dimensional models as derived from the the Ohio State leadership studies (Stogdill, 1974) he, in fact, was observed to devote considerable time and thought to enacting symbolic leadership in efforts to maintain the existing culture of the school and, occasionally, to attempt to lift it to new and higher levels.

Thus, he carefully attended to the nurturance of organizational stories and myths: in informal coffee klatches, on frequent tours of the building, or presiding at formal rituals. On these frequent occasions he often restated the traditions of the school (saying, for example, "This is a a strict school. It's a warm school, and we care for you. But it's a strict school") and extolled the achievements of such heroes as students who have "made good" by winning awards or scholarships or acquitted themselves creditably in an athletic contest. He often invoked the recollection of beloved former staff members who had established traditions in earlier years of the school's history. A favorite was to quote, and retell stories about, a long-since-deceased superintendent of schools who had served the district for many years and under whose administration all of the present buildings in the district had been constructed and most of the present staff employed.

Some, though considerably less, attention was devoted to the creation of new legends, fresh organizational stories, extolling

emerging heroes, and developing new social norms in the organization. For example, the principal was very proud of the humanities program of studies that had been developed under the leadership of a chairperson and selected teachers. The individuals in this group were often lionized by the principal and the pedagogical and organizational methods used in their program (such as team planning, team teaching, and varied instructional methods) were frequently cited approvingly by the principal as models for others to follow.

2. This senior high school is multicultural. The literature is sometimes understood to suggest that organizations not only create cultures, but each is characterized as a single culture. The observations from the school examined in this study, at least, make clear that it is not monocultural. It is multicultural.

There is little doubt that the high school is, overall, characterized as a distinctive describable culture. Its norms are identifiable; its rituals, myths, heroes, and stories describable; its values definable. Yet this culture is not a monolith that is invariably isomorphic across the various levels and divisions of the school organization. Within the high school there are clearly identifiable subcultures and these are important in understanding the institution as a whole. Perhaps it is

somewhat analogous to the national culture: while there is clearly an "American" culture that is complex yet describable, it is at the same time comprised of subcultures that are important if one is to understand the culture of America today.

For example, very high value was placed on exercising the legal authority of the institution in controlling the behavior of students. This was consistently revealed through behaviors of administrators that emphasized control (albeit often paternalistic) of students. The principal of the school and the three assistant principals spent much of their time emphasizing to teachers the need to exercise institutional control over students.

The 8-person guidance department, on the other hand, strongly cohered around commitment to the value that the desirable state for students was for them to be free to exercise informed self-control. This led to conflict when, on a number of occasions, administrators sought to persuade guidance counselors to force students to withdraw from certain courses that were oversubscribed or enroll in other courses that were undersubscribed.

Similarly, the teachers in the special education unit conceptualized their roles in a remarkably different way from the more traditional teachers in the school. They tended, for example, to act as ombudspersons for their charges: going about the school to intercede for them wherever they saw the potential for problems to arise, enlisting the aid of other staff members above and

beyond the call of normal duty, consulting with "regular" teachers to solve classroom problems involving special education students. As the chairperson of the guidance department observed, "They don't let their kids fail; they don't let them fall through the cracks; they make sure that this school 'works' for their kids. How different it is with the kids who cut classes and fall behind: they couldn't make it in the first place then, when they fall behind in their work, we say, 'OK, you make up all that you missed and we'll let you come back to class'. Well, they couldn't do the work in the first place. They're doomed to failure: they fall through the cracks".

3. The senior high school is a clan. Students of social organization have long noted that clans, by definition, achieve coordination and control (and clan leaders exercise influence) largely by virtue of the fact that individual members of the clan are thoroughly socialized into the clan. Shared beliefs, not proximity to one another or family relationships, unite the members of a clan into a social organization (Durkheim, 1961, p. 194). Loyalty arising from the desire of every individual member to cooperate is spontaneous and very high (Mayo, 1945, p. 51). Faith in the ideals of the clan and consensus on its values forges the bonds of commitment between and among members, creating the consent around those values that makes the clan a valued source of personal satisfaction for its members (Murphy, 1979, p.

103). Thus is created an organizational philosophy. This philosophy is a mechanism for integrating an individual into the organization, linking his/her own individual goals with those of the organization and also a mechanism of authority and control (Ouchi and Price, 1978).

This high degree socialization - virtually complete merging of individual goals of teachers with the espoused values of the organization - is the outstanding characteristic of the high school that was studied in the research being reported here.

This merging of personal commitment with organizational values in the high school is not difficult to understand. Teachers and administrators had entered school as pupils at the age of five or six; they reported success in school and liking it; and, with few exceptions, such as brief time out for military service or child rearing, they had remained in school ever since. This meant, in many cases, virtually continuous participation in schools for periods of 25 to 35 years or more. In fact, partly as a consequence of the compensation plan in the district, many of the teachers continued to take graduate courses in nearby universities thus continuing their role as students as well as teachers.

Thus, the school is an organization whose legitimacy and authority is largely unquestioned by teachers who are almost completely socialized to the values and goals of the organization

and who anticipate a lifelong career with the organization. Among the professional staff within the school organization alienation is minimal, commitment is maximized, and cooperation of teachers is secured with minimal use of explicit hierarchical control. This is not an organization that is loosely coupled. It is one that uses clan-like structures as mechanisms of coordination and control which strongly emphasize cultural norms and values as bearers of authority and means of coordination, rather than bureaucratic mechanisms.

Discussion

The term, clan, has a broad range of acceptable contemporary meanings in referring to social systems. On one hand, one can stress the narrow view that emphasizes common ancestry of group members and, on the other hand some use the term more loosely to refer to a group of associates (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1976). But the social science literature on clans tends to stress the social cohesion that arises from shared values in the organization as being a central characteristic of the clan.

Murphy, for example, (1979) points out that "The essence of the clan is that the kinship of all members is only imputed and cannot be demonstrated, as in lineage . . ." (p.103) and goes on to describe what this study found to be a striking and central characteristic of the high school: in a clan, Murphy said, "Relationships within . . . groups is a matter of faith and consensus"

(p.103). This was clearly powerful organizational "glue" in the school described in this study. Indeed, these value-laden bonds of unity appeared to be unarguably stronger than bureaucratic rules in maintaining control, order, and cohesion in the organization. What was being witnessed in the high school was an organization neither exhibiting the precision of rational bureaucracy, so elegantly described by Weber (1947), nor the "anarchy" so popular today in describing educative organizations. But what was very evident in the observations of this study was the importance of such concepts as "spirit of brotherhood", "solidarity", and bonding of group members - which are central characteristics of clans (Murphy, 1979, p.103) . This calls to mind the earlier views of Durkheim (1961) who described the unity that arose from the bonds of fraternity that one finds in clans emerging from the shared beliefs held by members and their reinforcement through rites and rituals (Durkheim, 1961, pp. 128-194). Such value-laden relationships were powerful in shaping the behavior and the values of the principal and other professionals in this school.

The concept of the clan has been applied to the analysis of contemporary American and Japanese industrial and commercial organizations (Ouchi 1978, 1981). Ouchi, for example, has described organizational control in certain types of corporations as being highly informal and implicit, rather than the stereotypic expectation of control being exercised by explicit formalization

of rules. He describes the crucial function of corporate philosophy as the bearer of authority and control: "Organizational philosophy," Ouchi instructs us, "... is primarily a mechanism for integrating an individual into an organization. By providing a clear understanding of an organization's goals, objectives, and methods for accomplishing those goals, a philosophy permits individuals to link their own individual goals with those of the [organization]" (Ouchi, 1978, pp. 41-42). Peters and Waterman (1982), in a survey of apparently effective American corporations, described this as being an essential characteristic of such firms. And it is this philosophy, this commitment to and belief in values, that is the essence of the clan. Factions may bicker, individuals may rebel on occasion, griping may be rampant, but the central core of values - the "philosophy" - of the clan (whether a corporation, a family, or a school) is the mechanism through which its members are bonded and thus amenable to organizational discipline. In this sense the philosophy of the organization becomes, we might say, the totem of the clan.

The modern clan-like organization displays five critical characteristics (Ouchi and Price, 1978):

1. There is high agreement among members as to what constitutes proper behavior;
2. There is high agreement among members regarding what is legitimate authority, and this is rooted in the traditions of the group rather than some rational formulation;

3. The beliefs and values of the organization are communicated through a system of rituals and ceremonies (rather than codified in law and detailed rules);

4. Stable staffing patterns, with expectations for long-term if not lifetime employment, are characteristically present;

5. Selective recruitment followed by intensive socialization which, together, result in high levels of loyalty and commitment to the values and traditions of the clan.

My observations make clear that in the senior high school these were not only principal organizational characteristics, but dominant. Predictably, this clan has developed a strong culture which - as I have described - is extremely powerful in maintaining organizational control and discipline and is the dominant influence in evoking the cooperative effort that we normally associate with being organized. But, how do we describe this clan? What is it like? What are the values arising from its history and traditions that motivate and shape the behavior in predictable ways? To be brief, I will highlight three themes that emerge from the observations in this study.

One is impoverished, and it is a central theme. This clan has been down-at-the heels for decades} Money comes hard here: seven out of the last ten school district tax levy proposals were defeated at the polls by the voters, resulting in a decade of austerity in which budgets have been gutted of all but the barest

essentials.

For example, though enrollments have been falling dramatically for years, there were not enough student desks to go around because the furniture (most of it now over 25 years old) is breaking down while there have been no replacement purchases in memory.

Similarly, students in the office practice and business education rooms take turns pounding on worn-out typewriters because so many machines are broken down. There has not been a service contract for years nor replacement of the equipment, and the skimpy funds budgeted for repairs no longer come near to keeping the equipment going. When asked what plans the Business Education department had for getting into word processing and electronic technology, the chairperson scoffed, saying, "Are you kidding? Even if we could get the money to buy the equipment, how would we maintain it? Who would replace the software as it wears out under the heavy use in a place like this? I can cannibalize some of our old manual typewriters to keep a few of our machines going, but you can't do that with computers. I'm trained in word processing; we've got teachers here who have been studying computers and are really into all of that. But where do we get the money to support a program?"

The school is equipped with student lockers in the corridors. Each locker is equipped with a lock, for which students are issued keys. Over the years locks broke and keys were lost, and

budget requests for repairs were "deferred". At the same time, allocations for clerical personnel were reduced and it was decided to eliminate supervision of lockers and keys as one of the duties of the office staff. Locks broke, keys disappeared, and the day came when there were not enough lockers functioning to assign to each of the students even though enrollments were down. Parents protested to the Board of Education and the problem was finessed by assigning a classroom teacher for two periods per day to take charge and straighten the matter out. The costs of his services are concealed under the "instruction" category of the budget, rather than appearing as a maintenance cost.

And when the Board of Education directed that one copy of each textbook be sent to the Board Room to form a library of textbooks that would be open to the public, the teachers were dismayed. Did the Board of Education not know that the battered textbooks that they did have were still insufficient to go around and, indeed, they were using ingenious schemes for students to share those that were available?

This clan is also embattled. The politics of governance in the school district has, for many years, been fierce and and nearly continuous bruising battles have long since divided the community into two adversarial camps. For years, the composition of the school board has teetered 4-3 from election to election, with one camp holding the narrow majority now and likely to lose

it again at the next election. The teachers speak matter-of-factly of the "white hats" (those generally seen as supporting their view of schooling) and the "black hats" (who are generally seen by teachers as arch-conservatives who oppose all but minimal schooling).

These grinding, embittered political battles have had powerful impact on the clan as the tides of fortune favored first one side in the community and then another with superintendents of schools coming and going as a result. Staving off reductions in traditional programs and services has long been a central preoccupation of the clan, which has probably resulted in little more than slowing the steady erosion over time. Clan members speak of "being in the trenches", "fighting a rear-guard action", being "under fire", with their proposals to improve the school program getting "blown out of the water". The concept of "surviving" arises frequently in their conversation.

This clan is professional. Its members are well educated, extensively trained professionals, whose provenance is wide-ranging. They take great pride in their competence in specialized sub-professions (e.g., English teacher, science teacher, school psychologist, counsellor, social worker) and are actively involved in maintaining ties with professional peers outside of the district through attending conferences, participating in associations, and taking graduate courses. An on-site visit to the school by the 30-member Middle States Association evaluation team

was a highly energizing professional "shot in the arm" for the clan which they saw as legitimizing and supporting their claims of professional competence.

Conclusion

As recent literature on the organizations of schools predicted, the senior high school exhibited few organizational characteristics that could reasonably lead to the conclusion that it was a bureaucracy. In this limited sense, it was a loosely-coupled system (Weick 1976, 1982). However, the school was in fact organizationally highly cohesive and maintained powerful mechanisms for organizational control and discipline. These seem to be well-described by the metaphor of the clan.

Analysis of the data in this study was facilitated by the theoretical work of Tagiuri (1968) on organizational climate. He identified a taxonomy of four environmental factors which comprise organizational climate: ecology, milieu, social system, and culture. The data gathered in this study sorted easily into these four factors. The factors, together with very brief descriptions of what they include, and their dynamic interrelationships are described in the model shown in the accompanying Figure (below).

[FIGURE GOES ABOUT HERE]

This model is a somewhat modified version of the one suggested by Anderson (1982).

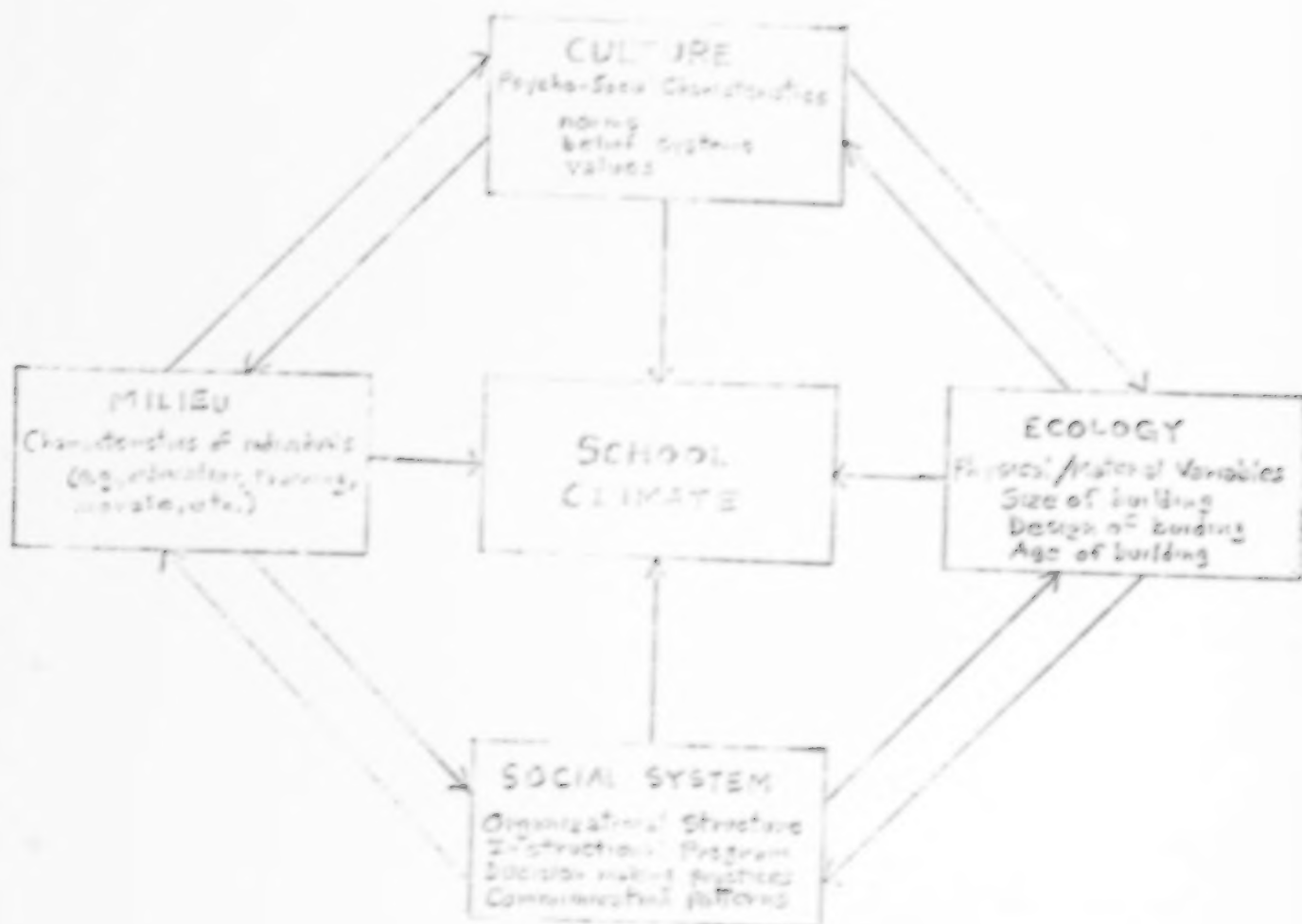


Figure. Interactive model showing possible relationships among key environmental factors.

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Using the model proved to be helpful in analyzing the considerable amounts of data gathered in this rather long and intensive ethnography. One of the dimensions in this model - namely, culture - appeared to be far more important in my observations than the other three. Thus, it is unlikely that each of the four dimensions suggested by Tagiuri is of equal valence either in relationship to the others or as a causative factor in the organizational climate in the school.

This suggests that the culture in the school may be profoundly more important as a causative factor in establishing the organizational climate in the school than such things as the organizational structure (either formal or informal), the physical environment of the school, or even the average characteristics of individuals who inhabit the school. In view of the centrality of organizational climate in the research literature on instructionally effective schools, this appears to be a potentially important finding. It suggests the importance of understanding the dynamics of organization and leadership as they contribute to the development of the culture in a clan-like organization.

Further analysis of data from this study is expected to yield some propositions as to the clan structure of senior high schools as an organizational phenotype that may be examined as generalizations in a population of such schools.

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